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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
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***Signs* and C.S. Lewis: The Meaning of *Meaning* and the Value of Film**

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Lovers of C.S. Lewis frequently say his power as a fantasist and apologist is his understanding of the importance of imagination in human knowing—its emotional impact, experiential quality, intimate connection to both faith and our longing for encounters with mystery. Behind Lewis's understanding of imagination is his awareness that meaning precedes language and therefore truth. Lewis unlocks the power of art, myth, and language in realizing that meaning is *connection* and that many "meanings" are experiential, intuitive, imaginative, and semi-conscious. The implications of Lewis's theory of *meaning* on the medium of film are several and best exemplified in the last three of M. Night Shyamalan's movies, *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs*.

The Problem of Meaning

Two passages in Lewis are foundational to our understanding his definition of meaning. The first of these appears in *The Last Battle*, describing the New Narnia, the heavenly one: "The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there you will know what I mean" (213). The most significant part of the passage is the line, "as if it meant more." But what exactly does that mean? A quality of the new Narnia which contrasts it with the old is its apparent increase in size, but this turns out not to be so much an increase in physical size as in the largeness of its being (the new Narnia looks more "like the real thing"[210]). And as being increases, so does meaning. A start perhaps, but hardly a definition.

The second significant passage occurs in "Bluspels and Flalansferes," an essay of literary theory in which Lewis considers the problem of literal versus figurative or metaphorical language:

[I]t must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. (*Rehabilitations* 157-58)

This paragraph, unfortunately, is more of an addendum to "Bluspels," and thus there is no sufficient context for knowing exactly what Lewis means when he says imagination is the "organ of meaning" and meaning is the "antecedent" to truth. To understand Lewis's definition of meaning and how it impacts a discussion on film requires two explorations, one in a problem of epistemology that was central to Lewis thinking, and the other a careful analysis of Lewis's theory of myth.

The Epistemological Dilemma

We begin with Lewis's epistemological problem: the abstract/concrete or thinking versus experiencing

dilemma. Lewis noted that, while experience allows concrete knowing that is intense and immediate but critically vague, reason allows careful contemplation that is clear, but abstract and time bound. How can reality be known with the clarity of reason but without the space of abstraction, of separation? And how can reality be experienced intensely but with a knowing that is complete? ("Myth Became Fact" 65-66). Humor exemplifies the dilemma: we can laugh at a joke or think about why it was funny. We cannot do both at the same time. Why is this a problem? Lewis's own example is of pain. He thinks to himself, 'If only my tooth would stop hurting, I could write another chapter for my book about pain. But when do we really know pain except when experiencing it in all its intensity?' Lewis says that myth is a partial solution to this problem.

Lewis makes a number of distinctions in his "Myth Became Fact" article that will facilitate our understanding. First he makes a connection between "myth" and "reality" and a separation of "reality" from "truth": "What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that *about which* truth is)"(66). Reality (or fact) is what is; truth is a proposition *about* fact. A little later in the paragraph Lewis notes that myth is not "like direct experience" and in the following paragraph he asserts that myth "comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history." Myth serves as a bridge across the chasm separating heaven from earth. Next, Lewis describes our earthly existence as a "valley of separation" (66n). He suggests, "Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; *in hac valle abstractionis*" (66). What is Lewis saying about reality in this metaphor? In *Mere Christianity* Lewis suggests there are different kinds of reality: the descriptive facts and the prescriptive ones (14-19). "Myth Became Fact" is here revealing kinds of interconnected realities: the reality we experience on earth, the cognitive experience of making abstract statements of truth about that reality, and the experience of a transcendent something (a higher reality, a myth-like heavenly realm) in mythic stories.

In summary, myth reveals heavenly reality not earthly experience (except once, says Lewis, in the Incarnation); truth is born of concrete myth, but truth is abstract statements *about* reality here in the fallen world of abstraction, "the valley of separation"; so any statement of truth we get out of myth is an abstraction as well. Now how to draw all of this together?

The answer can be found in *The Great Divorce*. A ghostly man who has a passion for inquiry, (though not for actually finding any truth) is visiting the outskirts of heaven. There he meets an old friend who has moved beyond the ghostly stage to full presence, full being in heaven. The glorified man is there to invite the ghost to go further in. But the ghost refuses unless certain guarantees are met, especially "an atmosphere of free inquiry" (43). The glorified man tells his friend he will find no such thing; he will find final answers. The ghost responds that there is "something stifling about the idea of finality" to which the other replies, "You think that, because hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom" (43). Thus, in Lewis's vision, what can only be an abstract idea on earth is concrete reality in heaven.

When one leaves the valley of abstraction (our fallen world) for the mountain of myth (the heavenly realm), abstraction and separation disappear as what become abstract truths here in the valley are followed to their concrete mythic sources on the mountaintop. There is, therefore, no place along the stream where one may stop and say, "here is truth but there is myth." The separation no longer exists. Experiencing and thinking simply become knowing.

But how does understanding Lewis's Epistemology help us define meaning? First answer: Meaning can be abstract language statements. But it can also be concrete and can precede language. Look at "Myth Became Fact" again:

I am trying to understand something very abstract indeed—the fading, vanishing of tasted reality as we try to grasp it with the discursive reason. Probably I have made heavy weather of it. But if I remind you, instead, of Orpheus and Eurydice, how he was suffered to lead her by the hand but, when he turned round to look at her, she disappeared, what was merely a principle becomes imaginable. You may reply that you never till this moment attached that 'meaning' to that myth. Of course not. You are not looking for an abstract 'meaning' at all. If that was what you were doing the myth would be for you no true myth but a mere allegory. You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we

state this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely.” (66)

Lewis is saying that when we take a meaning out of a myth we turn it into an abstract truth statement, an idea. When we leave the meaning in the myth and do not try to turn it into language statements, the meaning remains a concrete experience. In myth, ideas can be experienced as concrete thought.

Concrete Thought

Imagine a line on a chalkboard representing a spectrum. At one end of the line appears the word “Abstract,” and the other end the word “Concrete.” The instructor applies these kinds of knowing to the definition of a man. Thus, at the abstract end of the spectrum is written a dictionary definition of a man, followed by a poetical expression of a man, a photograph of a man, and, at the concrete end of the spectrum, the instructor himself standing beneath the line:

Abstract			Concrete	
A man (male gender of the species) is a bipedal primate capable of speech.	“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite faculties . . .” (<i>Hamlet</i> 2.2.292-93)	Photograph	The Instructor himself	

Nowhere in this spectrum do we yet see “concrete thought.” Even the photograph perceived in the imagination is an abstraction of the real man, despite its close approximation to the concrete reality. But where in this spectrum do we fit Tolkien’s hobbits? Admittedly hobbits are like people, a version of the human, but in Tolkien’s myth they are *not* people, and therefore they are not abstractions of anything. Hobbits are concrete realities; they are *real* imaginary objects, that is, concrete objects of thought. When our minds turn to hobbits, we both think about and experience them at the same time.

A fine example in film of thinking which is experientially immediate yet has the clarity of reasoned thought occurs at the ending of *The Sixth Sense*. The protagonist, a child psychiatrist played by Bruce Willis, has helped a small boy who literally sees the dead to deal with his special gift. But when he tries to restore his own troubled relationship with his wife, he experiences a brilliantly edited “eucatastrophe” (to borrow Tolkien’s term). At the moment the hero realizes he is dead, the audience is presented a montage of fleeting images from throughout the film that cause us to remake its

meaning in an instant. New knowledge arises with the clarity of reason, but the speed and intensity of direct experience. Those who have seen the film can likely describe the experience thusly: “When I first saw it, I thought I was watching one kind of movie; when I got to this key point of revelation in the film, I reconstructed it in an instant—it happened so fast that I could not immediately put it in words, but I knew and knew it completely.” This is an experience of concrete thought. In myth and film, meaning is often communicated with the clarity of reason, the intensity of experience, and without abstract language. One might respond, “But language is used in *The Sixth Sense* scene.” Yes, but in it the language does not have the same effect. It is more like sounds than words; the concepts recalled come back to us in an instant, like solid objects.

We are now positioned to make sense of Lewis’s “Bluspels and Flalansferes” essay. When we receive myth as story, we are experiencing a principle concretely. Only when we put the experience into words does the principle become abstract. But if we can know a principle either concretely or by abstraction, then meaning can be either concrete or abstract. This agrees with the statement in “Bluspels” that meaning is the necessary antecedent to truth (157). Some meanings are abstract propositions—truth statements. But there are other kinds of meanings which can only be apprehended in the imagination which thinks experientially. Such meanings, the kind we get in myth and film for example, come prior to abstraction and apart from language.

What then is meaning? For Lewis, meaning is *connection*, the perception of a relationship. If we look further at Lewis’s theory of myth, this definition will become more clear.

Myth and Film

Myth is language without language—a mode of *languageing* in form. Myth is a communication which is not in the words used to communicate it but in the form of the myth itself. Lewis explains this in his introduction to *George MacDonald: An Anthology*:

We all agree that the story of Balder is a great myth, a thing of inexhaustible value. But of whose version—whose *words*—are we thinking of when we say this? For my own part, the answer is that I am not thinking of anyone’s words. No poet, as far as I know or can remember, had told this

story supremely well. I am not thinking of any particular version of it. If the story is anywhere embodied in words, that is almost an accident. What really delights and nourishes me is a particular pattern of events, which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached me by some medium which involved no words at all—say by a mime, or a film (26-27).

Myth communicates meaning apart from language. And the same thing can be said for film.

In “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien rejects the idea that myth is a “disease of language” and argues instead that the opposite is more the case (*The Tolkien Reader* 48). Shyamalan argues a similar point in his film *Unbreakable*. There he sees language as originating in pictures. Says the expert in comic art: “I believe comics are a last link to an ancient way of passing on history. The Egyptians drew on walls. Countries all over the world still pass on knowledge through pictorial forms. I believe comics are a form of history that someone, somewhere, felt or experienced.” Though we may not think much of comic books revealing the hidden nature of the universe, Shyamalan is making a point that can be verified and is so by Lewis’s good friend Owen Barfield whose book *Poetic Diction* influenced Lewis’s epistemology greatly.

In *Unbreakable*, Night offers a theory of myth, of a concrete picture language that precedes modern language forms in which sign abstracts the signified. The image form, surviving in a kind of collective human unconscious, intrudes itself into contemporary culture through comic art. What it reveals is an archetypal pattern of the hero, Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth.” Night further intuits a quality of communicating which Barfield uncovers in his *Poetic Diction* (45-92). A careful study of linguistic history reveals that a strong distinction between sign and signified, between the literal and the figurative, is new to human thinking. For people before the modern era (even up through the medieval period), to name a thing was to invoke it; speech had physical consequences in the world; words were what they signified; metaphorical meanings were possible because their connective representation was in some way literal. Film resonates with Barfield’s view of past language. What it says is what it is, and what is shows is what it means. In the past, words *were* more like pictures, in fact more like physical actions.

The connection between myth and film is clear. Film is a mode of *linguaging* which communicates to us like a physical action, as a concrete experience,

and it is able to do so either without language or by converting language into experiential form. An example of film communicating as form without language can be seen in Shyamalan’s most recent film, *Signs*. Near the end of the film, the family has boarded up its windows and doors in fear of an eminent alien attack. As the attack begins, they realize they have left the dog outside to fend for itself. The family stares at a wall in the family room. Outside the dog is barking. The camera slowly zooms in on the wall. The barking becomes a frenzy, then the growling that accompanies fighting and biting, then the whimper of injury, and finally silence. We never see beyond the family room wall, but we, without words, what has happened to the dog.

The Crisis of Meaning

Barfield and Lewis both say words were more like picture, like physical actions *in the past*. What happened? Lewis proposes that an increasing distinction between literal and figurative meanings, between sign and signified, between word as object and abstraction is ultimately traceable to the fall. He describes our world in times closer to the fall when the “Earth itself was more like an animal . . . And mental processes were much more like physical actions” (*That Hideous Strength* 284). It was a time when “matter and spirit were, from our modern point of view, confused” (285). Lewis says that a separation (between spirit and matter and between literal and figurative) has increased because we have viewed the world with an increasingly materialistic bias (in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* [3-4]). Lewis predicts an end to the separation in an eschatological vision of heaven and earth coming together in which fact and myth are “remarried” and literal and metaphorical thinking come “rushing together” again (*Miracles* 211-12). Until then, myth is the means Lewis recognized by which we manage to experience the fullness of meaning that only concrete thought can provide. We may now add film as a mode of *linguaging* that will enable us to do the same thing.

Shyamalan captures the crisis of meaning in our current time in his newest film *Signs*. Where *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* taught us something of what meaning is, *Signs* wrestles with the question of whether life has any meaning at all. In the movie, a minister (played by Mel Gibson) who has lost his faith because of his wife’s death relates her last words to his brother, Merrill:

I never told you the last words that Colleen said before they let her die. She said, "See." Then her eyes glazed a bit. And then she said, "Swing away." Know why she said that? Because the nerve endings in her brain were firing as she died, and some random memory of us at one of your baseball games just popped into her head. There is no one watching out for us, Merrill. We are all on our own.

The Mel Gibson character will later find out that his wife's final words to him were not simply the random firing of neurons in her dying brain but a prophetic revelation he will need to save his son's life. He will learn that there are, indeed, no coincidences, that everything in life has meaning. At the film's end, he has returned to his faith.

The New Literacy

A final note: though film uses language to communicate, the best film makers are relying increasingly on pure form in image and sound to communicate meaning that is experientially concrete yet rationally clear. This emerging (or perhaps reemerging) mode of knowing is a rising new literacy that our educational institutions will have to foster. Prior to the invention of the printing press, the majority of people did not have to learn how to read. Life was dependent for most on farming skills. Technology redefined the need for literacy. Computers did the same thing when they became "personal" and "desktop." Computer literacy took only a decade or so to flood the national curriculum. Film and television, however, have been with us for 100 and 50 years respectively. We have assumed for too long that, just because they *can* be watched without learning their language, no literacy is needed. Such is not the case, and, as we turn increasingly from reading to film, television, and visually based computer screens, our need for education in film literacy increases as well.